

S-E-C-R-E-T

16 May 1966

STAFF NOTE

SUBJECT: NATO To Belgium -- A Good Idea?

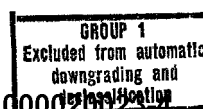
SUMMARY

North Atlantic Alliance officials are giving much thought to transferring NATO and US installations, such as SHAPE, NAC, EUCOM, and AFCEINT, to Belgium. The question arises whether such a move would be wise in view of the unstable situation in Belgium and the uncertain effect of locating NATO organs there. A preliminary consideration of the implications suggests that there would probably be more benefits than disadvantages from such a relocation.

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1. The Belgians have had serious social-political-economic troubles for many years, involving bitter feeling between segments of the population, occasional street demonstrations and clashes, strikes, and changes of government. None of the difficulties have been overcome, and even the trend of events is not favorable. Belgium today is not a unified nation. Some Belgians believe it should become a federation, with a large share of governmental power transferred from the central Brussels government to regional governments, to prevent a more drastic collapse of the nation.

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2. The problem, which is fairly well known in its general outlines, is at root the rivalry and antagonism between the Walloons in the south and the Flemings in the north. The Walloons, who are French-speaking and anti-clerical, were the dominant national element from the formation of Belgium in 1830 until after World War II. They were the cultural and industrial leaders of the country. The Flemings, Catholic and Dutch-speaking, were mostly farmers, who had to take a back seat in national affairs. But in the past 30 years, the Flemings have engaged in a determined drive for full political and cultural equality with the Walloons. Wallonia has fallen on hard times with the closing of many inefficient coal mines, while new industries have tended to establish themselves in Flanders rather than the south.

3. These developments have produced a high and continuing tension between the two groups, with each becoming more insistent on preserving its own identity and less tolerant of concessions to the other. The nation is bilingual, but most individual Belgians are not. The government has been able to devise no better approach to the problem than drawing a linguistic frontier from west to east, dividing Belgium roughly in half. This boundary has had the effect chiefly of increasing intolerance.

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4. Turmoil within Belgium has occurred in cyclical waves. There was a period of disorders when the first linguistic laws were proposed in the 1930s, and again during the controversy over the return of King Leopold III after World War II. It is now clear that another such period began with the presentation of the present linguistic legislation in 1961. Demonstrations occurred during the lengthy debate over the proposals in Parliament, dropped off just after the new legislation went into effect, but resumed with increasing frequency in the summer of 1965.

5. A notable example of extremism is found in the university city of Louvain, an enclave in Flanders. Because of the international reputation of the centuries-old university, Louvain is the only place in Belgium, other than Brussels, where teaching is permitted in both Dutch and French. Nonetheless, a militant part of the Flemish element is carrying on an intense campaign to drive out all the French speakers, insisting that they establish their own university in Wallonia. The disease is beginning to affect the political parties. Although the leading parties (the Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal parties) have been national in scope, there has lately been an ominous tendency for them to reorganize on regional lines. At its Congress last

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December, the Catholic party granted considerable autonomy to both its Flemish and Walloon wings on cultural matters. Some regard the split of the party as almost inevitable. Schism is also present in the Socialist party, in which the Walloon element feels that party headquarters has little sympathy with Wallonia's depressed conditions.

6. In view of all this, what would be the result of planting NATO installations in Belgium? No one can be sure, but there are some obvious areas of impact. There would undoubtedly be economic consequences. Some Belgians are already worried over the prospect of inflation coming from increased demand for housing, goods, and services. On the other hand, this demand could be a stimulus to the economy. Obviously, from an economic point of view, it would be better for NATO to be located in relatively depressed areas, i.e., declining industrial sections of Wallonia. In fact, one of the leading possibilities is that SHAPE would settle near Namur, a Walloon city.

7. Sociologically, NATO would have to be careful not to step on linguistic toes in dealing with the local population wherever it locates in Belgium. At some level of administration, NATO officials, in making arrangements, contracting, and hiring

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service personnel, would have to transact business with the local residents. If in Flanders, they would arouse hostility by trying to use French and, perhaps, by refusing to send their children to Dutch-language schools. (The reverse of this situation is most unlikely.) Even a location in Brussels and environs, as has been suggested for SHAPE and NAC, would not be problem-free. Like Louvain an enclave in Flanders, the capital city is officially bilingual, but it is expanding into areas which by law are only Flemish-speaking. Another effect of an influx into Belgium of foreign French-speaking military personnel is that it might increase tensions in the Belgian armed forces. Belgium has been trying to equalize the Flemish and Walloon elements of its officer corps, which has been overwhelmingly Walloon.

8. NATO installations and operations would probably not be in serious danger of involvement with hostile factions of Belgians during periods of unrest and public demonstrations, but there is still some chance that they would be harassed, if only by experiencing a cut-off of utilities.

9. Politically, the coming of NATO might be salutary for Belgium. Conceivably, it could give the country a sense of importance and divert its attention somewhat from its provincial

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concerns. The net effect might be to promote Belgian unity and stability. A counter-consideration, and an argument likely to be made by elements less friendly to NATO, is that a strong US presence in Belgium (which might result from the relocation) would detract from Brussels' prestige as a European capital and suggest American tutelage of Belgium.

10. The implications of NATO in Belgium are deserving of some study, but time is short, since the Alliance members hope to have made up their minds on relocation by the time of the 6-8 June ministerial meeting. At a first glance, moving to Belgium would seem to be some gamble for NATO, but probably not too great a one to take. In fact, it appears as though there would be more benefits than disadvantages in such a relocation.



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